

FATHER KNOWS BEST

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

"Do they trust Hashem? Do they believe that He truly knows what is best for them? Do they trust Him enough to set aside their own questions and concerns and subjugate their free will to His commandments?" These were the concerns that plagued Moshe Rabbeinu in his final days with his beloved children, the Bnai Yisroel.

As we prepare for the Yom Hadin - Day of Judgment - Rosh Hashanah, we must ask ourselves the same questions. Are we prepared to fully trust G-d? Do we truly believe that in the end adhering to His commandments will benefit our families, our people, the entire world, and ultimately, ourselves?

In 23:4-7 Moshe stated the prohibition against an Ammonite or Moabite marrying into the Jewish nation. The Torah explains that their actions a few months earlier in refusing the Jews simple hospitality and in conspiring with the evil Billam to destroy them was so reprehensible that they could not be forgiven. Had we been a threat to their sovereignty we could understand their fear and hostility. However, they were not among the seven Canaanite nations occupying Eretz Yisroel and were not in any danger from the Bnai Yisroel. Yet, their hatred for our mission and us motivated them to strike out.

In Parshas Pinchas, following the incident with Baal Peor, G-d commanded the Bnai Yisroel to take revenge and hate, but not to destroy! As unusual as the Mitzvah to "hate" sounds, in this week's Parsha G-d adds an additional dimension to our non-relationship with the nations of Ammon and Moav. The Torah concludes its attack against Ammon and Moav by stating (23:7) "You are never to seek their peace or prosperity." What a shortsighted, politically incorrect commandment and attitude! Did Hashem expect the world and the political climate in the Middle East to remain static forever? Would there never be an opportunity for Israel to make peace and have a productive relationship with her neighboring countries? It also appears that G-d was directing Israel's animosity primarily against "cousin nations." First they were commanded to destroy Amalek who was the grandson of Uncle Eisav, and then they were commanded to hate and never make peace with their cousins Ammon and Moav, the children of Great Uncle Lot!

There are two issues that I would like to discuss. a) Why we were commanded never to make peace with Ammon and Moav. b) Why we should trust G-d, regardless of our feelings, intuitions, and intellect. The reason we were commanded to hate Ammon and Moav and never make peace with them was to counteract their potential immoral influence. Let us not forget where they came from.

Ammon and Moav were the sons born to Lot's two daughters from their father Lot. Even if we explain the actions of Lot and his daughters in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gemorah as mistaken but noble, the bottom line is that it was incest. We can be certain that the Torah related this information to us in Parshas Vaera for many different reasons. However, one reason is clear and historically consistent, they were nations who were promiscuous in nature and for reasons of expediency.

Why did Lot choose to settle in the plains of the Yarden and the cities of Sodom and Gemorah? He could have chosen anywhere else in Canaan to be away from Avraham. The commentaries explain that Lot's primary reason for choosing Sodom and Gemorah was because he was attracted to their amorality and licentiousness. Undoubtedly, despite Lot's exposure to the teachings of Sarah and Avraham, the many years he spent living in Sodom had to have had a profound negative influence on himself and his daughters.

I always wondered why Lot, in the aftermath of Sodom's destruction, did not return to the loving embrace of his sister and brother-in-law? In fact, why didn't the daughters think to go to their Uncle's home? Why did they think, as some of the commentaries explain, that the whole world had been destroyed and therefore, as the sole survivors, they were obligated to continue the human race by sleeping with their father? Could they have believed that the famous and righteous Avraham and Sarah had also been consumed in the conflagration of Sodom? Therefore, we must conclude that the daughters never knew of the existence of Avraham and Sarah! Lot had kept that information from them so that he could continue to be the sole arbitrator of morality and justice. Even in the aftermath of Sodom's destruction and his miraculous redemption, Lot did not return to the security of Avraham's home and teachings. Therefore, the daughters and their children were raised under Lot's self-serving and liberal moral code.

As an added proof of Lot's expedient morality, remember his suggestion to the people of Sodom that they take his same two virgin daughters in exchange for the two angelic guests! What kind of impact did that have on his daughter's moral compasses? It is therefore no wonder that the moral character of Ammon and Moav would be the antithesis of who the Jewish people were supposed to be .

The problem is that a life style of unbridled sensuality or expedient morality is very seductive. This was tragically proven by the incident of Baal Peor when Moabite parents dressed their daughter in the finest and most seductive clothing for the sole purpose of compromising the Jews and bringing G-d's wrath down upon them. They succeeded and the Jewish men succumbed. Therefore, knowing the nature of humans, especially men, and wanting to protect them from the influences of Ammon and Moav's subjective morality, G-d commanded us to despise them and their lifestyle and never seek their peace or prosperity.

The second concern is, do we trust G-d? Imagine if the nations of Ammon and Moav still existed.

Imagine if as neighboring countries to Israel we would desire to establish a peaceful and mutually beneficial co-existence with them. How many of us would say, "No way! The Torah forbids it!" How many of us would respond, "Well, that was then, now is now. The times have changed, the people have changed, and their values are more closely aligned with our own. Who wants ongoing conflict and war? Why not attempt to make peace!" How many of us would subject our desires for peace and our own evaluation of the changing political landscape to G-d's uncompassionate and racist prohibition?

Before the Tzadikim among us jump up and proclaim their unyielding subjugation to the word of G-d, let me remind you of an incident in the life of Dovid Hamelech.

In Shmuel II Chapter 10, the death of Nachash the king of Ammon is recorded (approx. 2912 - 849 b.c.e. 424 years after Sefer Divarim was given.) The Navi records the following sentiment expressed by Dovid. "I shall do an act of kindness to Chanun the son of Nachash, just as his father acted with kindness toward me." So Dovid sent a message of condolences to Chanun on the death of his father. (When Dovid was forced to flee from Shaul he asked the king of Moav to protect his parents and brothers. At first, Moav did so but then the king killed Dovid's family. Nachash the king of Ammon saved one of Dovid's brothers.)

The Navi records that Chanun responded to Dovid's expression of condolences by suspecting the messengers of being spies and declared war against Israel. In the ensuing war, the Jewish forces led by Yoav and Avishai were victorious against the combined strength of Ammon and 32,000 mercenaries from Aram and Maacah. However, the war proved to be much longer (more than a year) and costly than expected. Many young Jewish soldiers lost their lives in the prolonged fighting.

Imagine, the great Dovid, the most righteous of all the kings, the progenitor of Mashiach, and the author of Tehillim, followed the dictates of his heart rather than the strict commandment of G-d. Dovid had every rational and emotional reason for challenging the prohibition against seeking peace and prosperity with Ammon. Who among us would have done differently! As a nation, we pride ourselves on showing appreciation for every extended goodness and favor. Certainly, a favor as profound as the one Nachash had shown Dovid was deserving of some small olive branch! Yet, the Torah did not make the prohibition conditional. It was given without qualification. G-d demanded that we never seek out the well being of Ammon and Moav, regardless of our concerns and feelings! Yet, even Dovid Hamelech succumbed to the desire to emote, rationalize, and then compromise.

In the end, Dovid's decision proved to be disastrous. Many men, Jewish and non-Jewish died as a result of Dovid's misguided initiative. Had he listened to the strict Halacha, he might have been accused of being ungrateful or politically boorish, but countless lives would not have been lost. (Note: In the end, the obvious reasons for listening to G-d had nothing to do with our understanding of why we should stay apart from Ammon and Moav! It just shows us how limited our perspective is even when we think we understand the reasons for a specific commandment. Therefore, the best

thing is not to second-guess G-d but to simply listen to His Mitzvos. Remember Adam and Chava?)

So, who knows best, G-d or us? Who should we trust, G-d or ourselves? As we draw near to Rosh Hashanah, it is time to ask ourselves the very same questions. Who knows best? Do we trust Hashem enough to subject our thoughts and desires to His commandments; or, will we persist in trying to outsmart, outguess, and second-guess the Almighty?

In the course of history, mankind's most ignoble times have been during war and conflict. It is almost as if we suspend our humanity and regress to our lowest common denominator; that of the wild beast. Murder, rape, and plunder accompany the soldier as he is given license to destroy that which should be most precious. It confirms, as the Torah teaches, that all morals and values rest upon the sanctity of human life. Devalue the incalculable value of life, and you undermine the foundation upon which all values and morals rest. The private domain of person and property then becomes subject to the unleashed amorality of the human animal. Therefore, following the instructions at the end of last week's Parsha as to how the Jew is to wage war, Moshe in this week's Parsha, presented 74 Mitzvos highlighting the value that the Torah places on the domain of person and property.

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